



City of Seattle

Special Populations

Introduction

Domestic violence respects no boundaries. People of any race, religion, occupation, education level, culture, socio-economic status, and sexual orientation can suffer, directly or indirectly, from violence within the home. Seniors, vulnerable adults and children often are the invisible victims of domestic violence. Discrete policies and procedures may be needed to appropriately respond to domestic violence in relationships of special populations.

Seniors and Vulnerable Adults

In 2000 there were 84,971 seniors (persons 60 years and older), representing 15 percent of the total population in the City of Seattle. By 2025, as the baby boomers age, forecasters predict that people 60 and over will comprise about 27 percent of the City's population.¹

Seniors face many challenges in living their lives, not the least of which is domestic violence. Research in this area is still in its infancy, but one definitive study, the National Elder Abuse Incidence Study of 1998, revealed that almost half a million people 60 years and older in this country were victims of domestic abuse in one year.² The vast majority of perpetrators of this violence (about two-thirds) were family members, specifically the victim's adult child or spouse.³ The types of abuse perpetrated on the elderly include physical, sexual, emotional, financial exploitation and neglect. Self-neglect is also a serious problem that commonly affects the elderly, but is beyond the scope of this plan. People with disabilities are similarly, if not more, vulnerable. Studies show that they are five to ten times more likely than the general public to be the victims of violent crime.⁴

In most states in this country, abuse perpetrated against vulnerable adults (frail elders and adults with disabilities) is the subject of mandatory reporting requirements. Washington State law requires that mandatory reporters report suspected physical and sexual assault to the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) and to law enforcement. It further requires that mandatory reporters report probable neglect, abandonment, financial exploitation, and abuse to DSHS. For a variety of reasons, many mandatory reporters of vulnerable adult abuse do not comply with their mandatory reporting obligations. According to the National Elder Abuse Incidence Study cited above, only 16 percent of cases of abuse against the elderly in the U.S. are reported to the authorities.

These statistics make clear the need for raising public awareness and conducting specialized training of agencies and professionals who work with the elderly and disabled about the likelihood that this population will become victims of domestic violence, and about mandatory reporting requirements.

In recent years, the Seattle Police Department (SPD) has received an increasing number of referrals from Adult Protective Services (APS). In 2000, SPD had 177 APS referrals. In 2003, the referrals to SPD increased to 659. SPD detectives working these cases estimate that two thirds to three quarters of the vulnerable adult referrals they receive are domestic violence-related. During the last four years, the

¹ U.S. Census 2000, *Demographic Profiles* and Washington State Office of Finance and Management, *Allocation of Seattle Population by Age, 2010, 2020, 2025, and 2030*.

² National Center on Elder Abuse, "Executive Summary," *National Elder Abuse Incidence Study, Final Report*, 1998, p. 4.

³ *Ibid*, p. 7.

⁴ Dick Sobsey, 1996.



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Seattle Police Department's workload for vulnerable adult abuse cases has almost tripled. Staff, however, has remained the same despite the rising numbers. Vulnerable adult abuse cases are among the most complex cases the police department investigates. The complexity of these cases is due to many factors, the most significant of which is the extreme reluctance on the part of many of these victims to participate in the investigation and prosecution of the case. This reluctance stems from a number of causes: alienation from and unfamiliarity with the criminal justice system, fear of retaliation by the abuser, threats by the abuser, and fear that admitting to the abuse or conviction of the abuser may result in their being placed in a long-term care facility. In addition, many of these victims suffer from physical and mental disabilities, including dementia, which can impair their ability to testify.

Children

Domestic violence also adversely affects children. Studies indicate that more than half of the female victims of domestic violence live in households with children less than 12 years.⁵ Children who witness domestic violence lose a sense of safety, security and stability in their home life. Over time, the abuse and violence in the home can disrupt school performance. Youth who have grown up in violent homes are at risk of creating the types of abusive relationships they have witnessed. At the very least, children who witness violence in the home are at greater risk for behavioral and physical health problems, including depression, anxiety, suicide ideation or attempts, abuse of drugs and alcohol, and aggressiveness toward their peers.

The adverse impact of domestic violence on children who witness it can be mitigated by a number of protective factors, such as positive parental support by the non-offending parent. However, the harmful effects of witnessing domestic violence can be exacerbated by the violence they experience themselves. Some studies show that up to half of men who abuse their intimate partners also abuse their children.⁶ Conversely, in about half of all child maltreatment cases, the mother is also abused. In Washington State, for example, there were 79,000 calls to Child Protective Services in 2002. Of these calls, 37,200 were accepted for investigation and about 40 percent had indications of domestic violence. Child Protective Services investigated 28,198 cases and 53 percent had domestic violence indications.⁷

Child abuse and domestic violence are inextricably linked within the family. But the various systems that respond to one or the other of these forms of violence do not always understand the dynamics of the other forms of violence or have the tools or capacity to work with each other to assure the well-being of victims. For example, many battered women who have not abused their children do not admit that they are victims of domestic violence because they are afraid that Child Protective Services may take their children away from them for exposing their children to violence or failing to protect their children. Child Protective Services needs to work closely with the criminal justice system and human services providers to assure that non-offending parents and their children have the resources they need to create safety and stability for themselves and to hold the offenders accountable.

During an on-scene investigation for a domestic violence case, children can be easily overlooked if they are not injured or directly involved in the incident. In Seattle, the patrol officers, the first responders on the scene, will assess the situation, provide information and referrals, and make an arrest, as appropriate.

⁵ U.S. Department of Justice, *Violence by Intimates: Analysis of Data on Crimes by Current or Former Spouses, Boyfriends and Girlfriends*, March 1998, reported in

⁶ Strauss, Murray A., Gelles Richard J., and Smith, Christine, *Physical Violence in American Families: Risk Factors and Adaptations to Violence in 8,145 Families*, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1990.

⁷ English, Diana, Domestic Violence and Child Protective Services, Domestic Violence Forum, May 2003 presentation. Report available through Washington State Office of Children's Administration.



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As a part of the Police Incident Report, officers are prompted to get the names of children and their dates of birth, as well as the names of those in whose custody the children are left. They also can indicate whether they have taken statements from children. If a child is injured, and is therefore considered a victim, more information is gathered, e.g. emotional state, excited utterances and nature of injuries. Other police agencies throughout the country, including the King County Sheriff's Office, are using or piloting other protocols to help officers gather more information on children at the scene, regardless of their status as witnesses or victims. Such protocols present an opportunity for officers to assure that children at a domestic violence scene are safe and can access the services they need.

People of Color/Immigrant and Refugees

According to the 2000 Census, one-third of Seattleites are people of color. People of Asian descent are the largest group at about 13.0 percent of the total population. Next are Blacks, or African Americans, who made up 8.3 percent. Latinos comprise 5.3 percent of the total population.

Most women, who want help to stop the violence, face a set of common barriers in their quest for support and assistance with ending the violence. These barriers include: misconstrued religious norms that contribute to self-blame, social isolation and on-going abuse and violence; lack of economic resources for independent living; fear of losing children; and lack of information or knowledge about what service and systems supports are available. The problems created by these common barriers are further complicated for people from different cultures.

Immigration status and limited English proficiency create additional challenges for refugees and immigrants who are domestic violence victims:

- Undocumented immigrants may be unwilling to report the abuse or violence they experience because they fear they will be deported. They believe, because of misinformation provided by their abusing spouse, that they can gain permanent residency only through the cooperation of the spouse. They do not know that they have the right to petition for lawful permanent residency independently.
- Another reason immigrant victims may not report is fear that the spouse will be deported or jailed. If the victim is economically dependent upon the spouse, deportation or imprisonment will leave them without sufficient resources to care for themselves or their children.
- Lastly, limited English proficiency further isolates abused women and significantly impairs their ability to discover community resources and supports. Without access to interpreters and translated materials, the victims remain totally dependent upon their abuser, who, as indicated previously, may give misinformation or withhold information.

A responsive coordinated systems' approach to domestic violence must adequately address these barriers if it is to succeed in helping victims of domestic violence among refugees and immigrants with limited or non-existent English skills. RCW 2.43.010 states, "*It is hereby declared to be the policy of this state to secure the rights, constitutional or otherwise, of persons who, because of a non-English-speaking cultural background, are unable to readily understand or communicate in the English language, and who consequently cannot be fully protected in legal proceedings unless qualified interpreters are available to assist them.*" This law goes on to describe the appointment, qualifications and payment of interpreters in order to secure these rights. Seattle is committed to carrying out this policy to insure that these barriers to safety are broken down and that victims have access to information, and resources within the community to assist them in their quest for safety.

Domestic violence is a form of oppression, based on behaviors designed to keep victims in their place, intimidate victims, dismiss victims and/or control victims. People of color also experience other forms of oppression – racism and xenophobia – designed to control and disempower them. For example, relations



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between the police and African Americans and Native Americans, historically, have involved significant violence and oppression. Some immigrants have experienced or witnessed similar levels of violence with respect to the police in their homeland. The consequence is distrust and reticence to engage the criminal justice system to help end the violence in their family. Indeed, in many communities of color, the goal is simply to end the violence. It is not to imprison the abuser. We need to develop culturally competent alternatives that help women who want to both end the violence and keep their families together.

Recent developments

- A regional Safe and Bright Futures two-year planning grant was recently awarded to develop services for children affected by domestic violence.
- A multilingual access institute to train language advocates on domestic violence took place in September 2004. At the writing of this plan the City awaits news of funding sought to continue this work.
- Federal funding will have also been sought to help support the annual Elder Abuse Conference for criminal justice professionals and others from around the region and the state receive specialized training.

Cross Reference: Investigations